

Truancy court in R.I. is judged as top model

The chief justice of the Massachusetts Juvenile Court praises the Rhode Island method of bringing the court directly to the schools.

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PROVIDENCE — The first time the eighth-grade girl set eyes on Marylou Mancini, the new principal of the Gilbert Stuart Middle School, it was on the street well after dark.

And when Mancini asked her what she was doing out so late, the girl swore at her.

Yesterday, the girl stood before Family

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ly Court Magistrate Angela Bucci, who borrows Mancini's desk in the principal's office once a week and presides over truancy court.

Like many of the other 25 children on yesterday's docket, the eighth grader had come to the court's attention because she had missed so many days of school that she was failing in class.

But as is often the case, absenteeism was only one part of a complex set of problems, including a home that was less than nurturing and a set of girl-

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friends who are "not good for you," as Mancini told the girl yesterday.

The girl, who spoke little and kept her head down, appeared to be caught between a tough persona and the desire to do the right thing. Ultimately, she let Mancini lead her.

When Mancini brought up the subject of the "girlfriends," she asked, "can you just walk away from them?"

"Would it help you, if she [Bucci] says you can have no contact with them?"

The girl shook her head "no," but Mancini asked the question again, and this time, the girl nodded.

"Yes, it would help her," Mancini told Bucci.

So Bucci ordered the girl to have no contact with certain students, warning her that she could be arrested if she violates an order of the court.

"That means you'll have to make new friends," Bucci said.

Yesterday's session at Gilbert Stuart was attended by the chief justice of the Massachusetts Juvenile Court, Martha P. Grace.

"We do the same thing in our court system," with truant children, Grace said, but there the offenders must miss an entire day of school to go before a judge in a regular courtroom.

A "huge advantage" of the Rhode Island method is that the court comes to the children, Grace said.

At Gilbert Stuart, Bucci had ready access to guidance coun-

selors and other professionals who know each child well. She relies on their recommendations in ordering Saturday classes, detention for tardiness or absenteeism, and occasionally, a psychological or educational evaluation.

Gilbert Stuart, which once had one of the lowest attendance rates among all public schools in Providence, now has more than 90 percent attendance, having gained 25 percentage points during the last year, Mancini said.

Grace said she would like to have a school-based truancy court in Massachusetts, but it depends on budgetary considerations, tighter this year than in the past.

In lean times, children's services are the first to feel the

pinch, Grace said, even though measures such as a truancy court save money in the long run by preventing social and emotional problems from getting worse and more costly to society.

Jeremiah S. Jeremiah, chief justice of the Family Court, said the truancy court has taken off since it began about 18 months ago at Hope High School. The court now comes to about 20 schools in about a dozen communities, he said.

Jeremiah and other Family Court officials will make two presentations on the truancy court at the annual meeting of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges in July.

He said the Family Court recently received a \$900,000 federal grant that will soon enable it to add counseling and educational services to the truancy court to help solve the problems the children bring before magistrates.

To make the maximum preventive effort, truancy court needs to go into elementary schools, according to social worker Mary Archibald, who works at Gilbert Stuart and Hope High School.

Jeremiah said an elementary school version of truancy court is in the planning stages.

The parents of truant children will be issued court summons to attend meetings at their children's school, where a judge will emphasize the importance of regular attendance and talk about the fines they face if they fail to bring their children on time, Jeremiah said.



OBSERVING: Massachusetts Juvenile Court Chief Justice Martha P. Grace monitors proceedings yesterday.